

‘Destructive Doctrinaires’: Abu Mus‘ab al-Suri’s Critique of the Salafis in the Jihadi Current

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Abstract:

Despite his arrest in Pakistan in late 2005, the Syrian jihadi theorist and strategist Mustafa bin Abd al-Qadir Sethmariam Nasar, better known as Abu Mus‘ab al-Suri, remains a towering figure in the global jihadi movement. His voluminous writings have attracted much attention both within and outside the broader Jihadi Current. While al-Suri is known mostly for his

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decentralised war-fighting theories, most extensively articulated in his *The Global Islamic Resistance Call*, al-Suri's writings also offer interesting insights into the various internal sub-currents within the Arab-Afghan movement and the global Jihadi Current, among which the Salafis figured prominently. Al-Suri was a strong critic of this sub-current during the mid- and late 1990s. Although he acknowledged fully the contributions of 'the Salafi-Wahhabi school' in the contemporary Jihadi Current, he opposed its doctrinal rigidity and inflexibility. He accused its proponents of undermining the Taleban Emirate by refusing to accept its legitimacy, and of stirring up problems in the Arab-Afghans' relationship with the Afghan population. He also found them guilty of whitewashing GIA atrocities in Algeria, and of weakening the jihadi struggle by fighting the wrong enemy. Al-Suri's analysis and criticism of the Salafis highlights the complexity and internal struggles of contemporary jihadism.

Introduction

Quitan Wictorowicz's seminal article on the 'Anatomy of the Salafi Movement' divides the Salafi movement into three currents: purists, politicians, and jihadis, united by a common Salafi creed, but sharply divided as to how to interpret the context and reality in which the Salafi creed should be implemented.¹ Such a categorization is illuminating and useful as a first step towards understanding contemporary Salafi movements. However, it does not provide much help in understanding the numerous doctrinal disputes and conflicts *within* the Jihadi Current (*al-tayyar al-jihadi*, see definition in footnote).² Furthermore, it may mislead us into thinking of contemporary jihadis simply as being radicalized elements within - or as by-products of - a broader Salafi phenomenon.

The writings of the Syrian al-Qaida theorist and strategist Mustafa bin Abd al-Qadir Sethmariam Nasar, better known by his pen names Abu Mus'ab al-Suri or Umar Abd al-Hakim, are a good starting point for understanding some of the doctrinal disputes within the Jihadi Current. Until his arrest, presumably in Quetta, Pakistan in late 2005, al-Suri was one of the most outspoken and articulate writers within this movement, and his critical analysis of previous jihadi experiences, especially regarding Algeria, provoked strong responses and debates. Furthermore, his own experiences from a variety of jihadi battlefields, his training as an historian, and his ambitions to recount and analyse the Jihadi Current 'objectively' in his writings, also make his books very interesting reading.

Broadly speaking, one may identify two tendencies within the Jihadi Current which have relevance to this paper, and which were prominent in the period from the mid-1990s until 2001, as described in al-Suri's books from this period. These tendencies or divisions were not formalized in any way and are perhaps better described as being a spectrum, or a continuum of positions, defined by two extreme positions. On the one extreme were the Salafi purists, for whom doctrinal purity was of quintessential importance, even if it meant fighting side-battles,

¹ Quitan Wictorowicz, 'Anatomy of the Salafi Movement', *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 29 (3) (April-May 2006), pp. 207-239.

² For the purpose of this article, al-Suri's own definition will suffice. He defined the Jihadi Current rather comprehensively, determined partly by ideology and partly by its main enemies: 'It comprises organizations, groups, assemblies, scholars, intellectuals, symbolic figures, and the individuals who have adopted the ideology of armed jihad against the existing regimes in the Arab-Islamic world on the basis that these are apostate regimes ruling not by what Allah said (*bi-ghayr ma anzala Allah*), but by legislating without Allah, and by giving their loyalty and assistance to the various infidel enemies of the Islamic Nation. The Jihadi Current has also adopted the program of armed jihad against the colonialist forces which attack Muslim lands on the basis that those regimes are allies fighting Islam and Muslims.' See Umar Abd al-Hakim (Abu Mus'ab al-Suri), *The Global Islamic Resistance Call. Part I: The Roots, History, and Experiences. Part II: The Call, Program and Method* (in Arabic) (Place and publisher unknown, December 2004); [Hereafter cited as *The Global Islamic Resistance Call*, p.685.

alienating allies, and shattering any semblance of a common front against the Zionist-Crusader enemy. At the other extreme were semi-independent thinkers and strategists such as al-Suri, whose main preoccupation was strategy, i.e. how the Jihadi Current can fight its enemy most effectively, not doctrinal purity for the sake of purity.

Al-Suri, who was himself born into a Syrian Sufi family (the *Rifa'iyyah* order in Aleppo), came to adopt and defend Salafi doctrines in his writings, but he did this only because that was the name of the game. From his writings, one gets the sense that had he been born twenty years earlier, al-Suri would have fought equally hard under Marxist or pan-Arab slogans. He styled himself as a writer, theorist, and strategist, and he consistently refused to be called a scholar or a cleric. In Afghanistan, where he became a prominent lecturer on guerrilla warfare theory, al-Suri faced criticism for citing Western, and even leftist, sources in his lectures.³ Given this background, it is therefore not surprising that al-Suri came to clash with 'purist Salafi' elements on a number of occasions. While the specific issues varied greatly, they all revolved around the general dilemma of how to strike a balance between ideological purity and political utility. I will show two examples of his anti-Salafi rhetoric: the first is taken from his experience with Abu Qutadah al-Filastini in London, and the second deals with his frictions with hard-line Salafis in Afghanistan.

Both cases suggest that the spread of purist Salafi doctrines in the Jihadi Current, rather than being a source of strength and renewal, has instead constituted a considerable obstacle to jihadi mobilisation, and has more often than not served to handicap and cripple jihadi groups by embroiling them in schisms and internal conflicts. More generally, al-Suri's critique also highlights what is probably a general phenomenon in any organised ideological insurgent movement, namely the struggle between ideological purists and politico-military pragmatists.

The 'Destructive Role' of Salafi Clerics

While a general discussion of the architecture of the Salafi ideological landscape is outside the scope of this paper, it may be useful to recapture why jihadi ideologues such as al-Suri came to use such vitriolic and harsh words about leading Salafi clerics. Al-Qaida's struggle against the United States and its European and Arab allies, Saudi Arabia in particular, has always depended on a minimum of political-religious legitimisation, which explains why there is far more literature on jihadi websites dealing with the question "why jihad?" rather than "how jihad?".⁴

Since the mid-1990s, leading Salafi clerics from Saudi Arabia and Yemen have refuted bin Ladin's message and defended the regimes against jihadi propaganda, earning them derogatory labels such as the Sultan's clerics (*ulama' al-sultan*), and worse. Al-Suri took considerable interest in these disputes, and he authored a long study, detailing and analysing bin Ladin's and the London-based Saudi dissident leader Saad al-Faqih's criticism of Shaykh bin Baz and Shaykh bin 'Uthaymin, two of Saudi Arabia's most famous scholars.⁵ Not seeing himself as a religious cleric

³ In fact, the most important item on his guerrilla warfare curriculum appears to have been an Arabic translation of Robert Taber's *The War of The Flea. A Study of Guerrilla Warfare Theory and Practice*, published in 1965. During his second stay in Afghanistan, from 1998 onwards, he gave many lectures based solely on this book. The Arabic translation of the book was entitled 'War of the Oppressed'. See Abu Mus'ab al-Suri, 'Explanation of the Book "War of the Oppressed"' (in Arabic), posted on *muntadayat al-firdaws al-jihadiyyah*, 21 Sept. 2006, www.alfirdaws.org/vb/showthread.php?t=16892&highlight=%E3%D5%DA%C8+%C7%E1%D3%E6%D1%ED, accessed Oct. 2006.

⁴ See Brynjar Lia, 'Al-Qaeda Online: Understanding Jihadist Internet infrastructure', *Jane's Intelligence Online*, January 2006.

⁵ Umar Abd al-Hakim (Abu Mus'ab al-Suri), *The Testimony of the Leaders of the Mujahidun and the Reform [Current] about the Sultan's Clerics in the Land of the Two Holy Places, Called Saudi Arabia: A Reading and Commentary of the Letters and Communiqués by Shaykh Osama bin Laden and Doctor Saad al-Faqih to Shaykh bin Baz, Shaykh bin 'Uthaymin and the Clerics of the Land of the Two Holy Places* (in Arabic) (Kabul: The Ghuraba Center for Islamic Studies and Media, 31 January 2001, Issues for the Triumphant in Righteousness No.5).

who could challenge the clerics on their turf, al-Suri found it most useful to launch his attack through the words of the two most well-known Saudi dissidents, one from the Reformist camp and the other from the jihadi camp. The intended audience was clearly jihadi sympathisers and recruits who were hesitant to join al-Qaida without the necessary religious legitimisation. This is also what concerned al-Suri the most with regards to the negative role played by ‘the purist Salafis’. Their clerics ‘misled the mujahidin’ and turned them away from the battlefield by preaching loyalty to corrupt rulers who had allied themselves with the Infidels.

Al-Suri’s account of bin Ladin’s little known jihadi experience in Yemen from 1989 onwards may be helpful in illustrating why the revolutionary jihadis such as al-Suri faced such a formidable challenge from both purist and politically minded Salafis. Following the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1988 and the foundation of al-Qaida, bin Ladin attempted unsuccessfully to establish ‘a jihadi base’ in Yemen, al-Suri recalls. This attempt was bin Ladin’s first military adventure outside Afghanistan.⁶ The conflict over the new constitution for the unified Yemen between Islamists and secularists offered a window of opportunity for the Jihadi Current in a country, which, in al-Suri’s assessment had all the preconditions for a successful jihadi uprising.

Al-Suri lay parts of the responsibility for the failure of bin Ladin’s efforts in Yemen at the door of leading ‘Salafi scholars’. Bin Ladin had gone to great lengths, sparing no efforts or money, to sway them to his side, believing that any uprising in Yemen must have their support if it was to succeed. Al-Suri, and other radicals around him, had egged him on, saying that he should push ahead, even without their support, but bin Ladin hesitated. As it turned out, key leaders in Yemeni society, from the tribal leaders, to the Muslim Brotherhood, and the Salafi scholars, sided with Ali Abdallah Salih’s government. Even Yemenite veterans of the Afghanistan liberation war, who had trained and fought with bin Ladin, were bought over by the new regime, and accepted government posts.⁷ The prominent Salafi scholar, Shaykh Muqbil ibn Hadi al-Wadi’i, had played a particularly ‘damaging and destructive’ role vis-à-vis bin Ladin. In al-Suri’s recollection, al-Wadi’i :

‘had written a book in which he described al-Shaykh Usamah Bin Laden as the root of all civil strife (*ra’s al-fitnah*) in Yemen. He put out recordings to sell on street corners to the people as they left the mosques after their Friday prayers. In those recordings he severely attacked Bin Laden, and made false claims that the latter had given him money to recruit him to a jihad that aimed to cause civil strife in the country. [...] I had heard Shaykh Usamah speak with some of his guests once about this and he said that if he were to forgive everyone who had ever harmed him in his life, he would never forgive al-Wadi’i.’⁸

What incensed al-Suri the most was the fact that the Salafi anti-bin Ladin rhetoric seemed to find fertile ground among al-Qaida’s key support base in Yemen: ‘Certain young Yemeni mujahidin had claimed that al-Wadi’i was *shaykh al-salafiyah*!! [i.e. the principal cleric of the Salafist creed]⁹ Clearly, Salafi rhetoric, in its more purist and anti-revolutionary form, had such an important impact on the Jihadi Current and its recruitment bases that it could not be overlooked by writers and theorists such as al-Suri. Hence, al-Suri dealt extensively with the ideological component of the Jihadi Current in general, and the Salafi ‘problem’, as he put it, in particular.¹⁰

The reason why anti-bin Ladin rhetoric by leading Salafi scholars had such resonance among al-Qaida’s core recruitment base was that the jihadi movement did not have a well-established and

⁶ *The Global Islamic Resistance Call*, p. 775.

⁷ *Ibid*, p. 776.

⁸ *Ibid*, pp. 775-6.

⁹ *Ibid*, p.775.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p.1060.

unified ideological foundation, separate from the Salafi school; its ideological character was multifaceted, evolving, and open to new influences. In al-Suri's analysis, the Jihadi Current's ideology derived from a variety of sources, among which doctrinal Salafism was a latecomer. Its ideological impact began in earnest during the Arab participation in the Afghan liberation war during the 1980s, and its influence on the Jihadi Current had grown ever since.

In al-Suri's view, the main sources of the Jihadi Current's ideology included:

- the organisational program of Sayyid Qutb, especially his principles of *al-hakimiyyah* [i.e. God's sovereignty on earth],
- The legal-political doctrine of Ibn Taymiyah and the Salafiyya school, especially the basis of loyalty and innocence (*al-wala' wa'l-bara'*),
- The jurisprudential and doctrinal heritage of the Wahhabite call,
- 'Some basic elements' from the Muslim Brotherhood (MB)'s ideology.¹¹

The MB legacy was important, even though their embrace of 'democratic Islamism' towards the end of the 20th century created a huge gulf between them and the Jihadi Current. Despite his emphasis on Qutb and the MB legacy, al-Suri did not underestimate the strong Salafi component in the Jihadi Current, and he often used the term 'Salafi-Jihadi School'.¹² In al-Suri's opinion, this had become, 'the main ideological programmatic identity which characterised the Jihadi Current during the 1980s and 1990s'.¹³

Salafism as a Source of Internal Discord and Conflicts

Obviously, purist Salafis, democratic MBs and Qutbist revolutionaries do not get along easily, and al-Suri was unequivocal about the potential for internal conflicts and splits due to the presence of several *competing* ideological influences within the Jihadi Current. For this reason, al-Suri devoted ample space to discussing and analysing the origin and evolution of the Salafi creed, offering his views of how its potential for conflict could be reduced.¹⁴ What interests us here is why and how al-Suri came to conceptualise the Salafis as 'a problem'.

When recounting the evolution of the Islamic theology and the emergence of the Salafi doctrines, al-Suri follows the traditional tenor of Muslim historiography, by emphasising that corrupting external influences on Islam during the Medieval Period, especially from Greek philosophy and rationalism, 'has had a negative influence of serious proportions' upon Islam.¹⁵ However, he differs from purist Salafis in pointing out that the introduction of logical reasoning also has had its advantages, even though, to be sure, these amounted to less than the damage it caused to the development of the Islamic creed.¹⁶ When discussing the great debates and

¹¹ True to his pedagogical, tutorial style of writing, al-Suri summed up the basic components and elements of the Jihadi Current in this neat mathematical equation: 'Some basic elements from the Muslim Brotherhood ideology + The organisational program of Sayyid Qutb + The legal-political doctrine of Imam Ibn Taymiyah and the Salafiyya school + The jurisprudential and doctrinal heritage of the Wahhabite call ---> The political legal organisational program for the Jihadi Current.' *Ibid*, p. 698.

¹² He defined it as 'a mixture of jihadi Qutbist organisational ideology (*al-fikr al-haraki al-jihadi al-qutbi*), the Salafi creed and the Wahhabite call.' *Ibid*, p. 697.

¹³ *Ibid*, p. 697.

¹⁴ This analysis came as part of his presentation of 'practical theories', which constituted the core part of his book, *The Global Islamic Resistance Call*, and is outlined in eight separate theories in Part Two of his book. Together, they constitute al-Suri's comprehensive war-fighting strategy. The first of these practical theories is 'the fighting creed', which discusses the ideological foundation of the jihadi movement. This section is nearly 200 pages, and it can obviously not be discussed at length here. *Ibid*, pp. 886-1077.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, p. 1059.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, p. 1059.

schisms in Medieval Islam involving the *al-Asha'irah*, *Ahl al-Hadith*, the *Mu'tazilah*, and others, al-Suri does not seem overly preoccupied by telling his reader who was right and who was wrong. Instead, he deplores how these doctrinal conflicts within the Sunni-faith bred 'partisan fanaticism' (*ta'assub al-madhbabi*), and party-ism (*tabaḥḥub*), which in turn led to 'bloodshed, conspiracies, and internecine fighting'.¹⁷ Al-Suri finds that such intra-faith schismatic battles were somewhat contained during the anti-Colonialist struggles in the 18th and 19th centuries, but have reemerged with full force during the latter half of the 20th century, as a result of the rise of 'contemporary Islamic revivalism' (*al-sabwah*) and the spread of the contemporary 'Salafi trend'.¹⁸

Al-Suri depicts the Salafis as the most conflict-prone of all: They are a sect at war with 'nearly every other revivalist school, [...] in particular the reformist schools (*al-madaris al-islahiyyah*), the Sufis, the tablighi movement (*jama'at al-tabligh wa al-da'wah*), most official clerics and imams, as well as the clerics of the four schools of jurisprudence.'¹⁹ It seems overly clear that al-Suri conceives of the Salafis as a pain in the neck for the jihadis. He would rather be without them and their hapless doctrinal feuds, but that is unfortunately not an option, because, as al-Suri points out, 'most of the jihadis chose the Salafi doctrine, jurisprudence and program'; in this way, 'the problem came to us, eventually', he laments.²⁰

Al-Suri describes at length the divisive and disruptive impact of the Salafis on the jihadi movement. The various conflicts emanating from the disputes over the Salafi doctrine constitute a serious threat to the Jihadi Current: it is

'one of the most intractable contentious issues [...] because at the end of the day, it will constitute an entry point for divisiveness, party-ism, and intolerant jurisprudence, which in turn breeds fanaticism in the domain of political ideology as well as in organizational terms within the jihadi movement itself. It causes internal strife among Muslims and within the Resistance movement itself at a time when we are being invaded by the American and Zionist Mongols and their war machines, and at a time when their satellites are eavesdropping on our ideological murmurs and monitoring our daily movements [...].'²¹

In other words, the controversies surrounding the Salafi doctrine represent a significant security hazard for the jihadi movement, and a considerable threat to the movement as a whole. Furthermore, the arrogant exclusiveness propagated by Salafi doctrinaires has meant that the Jihadi Current has been unable to form alliances and cooperative relationships with other Islamic militants. According to al-Suri, 'numerous relationships were ended and disputes started' as a result of the Salafis.²² In al-Suri's view, their presence in the Jihadi Current created an incompatibility of strategic proportion: The Salafis provoked conflicts with each and everyone, while 'the resistance has to be popular meaning a complete participation of all sects of the population, inclusive of all of its multiple diverse groups,' if it is to succeed.²³

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 1060.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*, p. 846.

²³ *Ibid.*

Al-Suri also finds that the Salafis share responsibility for the spread of *takfir* ('expiatory') ideas and practices within the Jihadi Current. He is at pains in refuting the notion that the mainstream jihadi ideology 'has merged with takfirism', as is often argued by jihadi opponents, but he does concede that:

'some prominent men from the Salafi-Jihadi current, or at least those scholars and students who followed them, offered interpretations which were either extremist, or were articulated in such a general manner that some ignorant jihadis took a step further and widened the concept of expiating others (*takfir*)'.²⁴

This and the fact that 'those actually belonging to the *takfir* trend relied on these texts [...], led in turn to a narrowing of the margin between the jihadi and the takfiri trend', a weakness which has been amply exploited by the enemy, al-Suri laments.²⁵ Since the rise of modern political Islamism, with its numerous factions and offshoots, in the first half of the 20th century, the issue of *takfir* has probably been the most divisive issue of all. Hence, al-Suri's criticism here is indeed very significant.

Al-Suri provides a number of examples where the adoption of hard-line Salafi positions by leading members of jihadi groups have negatively affected their movement. In the following we will discuss two cases, one from London/Algeria and the other from Afghanistan.

Al-Suri and Abu Qutadah in London, 1993-6

The first example involves the media cell of the Algerian *Armed Islamic Group* (better known by its French acronym, GIA) in London, from which the well-known Al-Ansar Newsletter (*nasbrat al-ansar*) was published between 1993 and 1998.²⁶ Al-Suri was a leading member of this cell from 1994 until mid-1996 and he worked closely with its chief editor, Shaykh Umar Mahmud Uthman Abu Umar, better known as Abu Qutadah al-Filastini, a well-known Palestinian cleric residing in London, who had started to preach in a prayer hall in London in 1994 and had adopted the Algerian jihad as his core issue. By then, and after several years of preaching in Peshawar, he had attracted many followers. By the end of the decade, he had emerged as a key Salafi-jihadi cleric and spiritual leader 'at the European level'.²⁷

Abu Qutadah and al-Suri's relationship was characterized by many ups-and-downs. A former LIFG member in London describes it as 'a love-hate relationship'. It was 'a headache for everyone'.²⁸ However, gradually, their relationship soured, and al-Suri came to reserve some of his harshest words of criticism for Abu Qutadah.²⁹ The latter had a much stricter and rigid Salafi

²⁴ *Ibid*, p. 842.

²⁵ *Ibid*.

²⁶ This section draws heavily on my book Brynjar Lia, *Architect of Global Jihad: The Life of al-Qaida Strategist Abu Mus'ab Al-Suri* (London & New York: Hurst and Columbia University Press, 2007), pp. 182-8.

²⁷ Abu Qutadah has been repeatedly taken into custody by British authorities who have called him 'the most significant extremist Islamic preacher' in the country. In October 2001, the UN Al Qaeda and Taliban Sanctions Committee listed him as an 'individual 'belonging to or associated with Al-Qaida organisation'. See Ministracion de Justicia, 'Juzgado Central de Instruccion no.005, Madrid, Sumario (Proc. Ordinario) 0000035 /2001 E', dated 17 September 2003, [indictment against the Abu Dahdah network], available at <http://news.lp.findlaw.com/hdocs/docs/terrorism/espbinldn91703cmp.pdf>, accessed February 2004, p. 27; 'Profile: Abu Qatada', *BBC News* 9 May 2006, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/4141594.stm, accessed Oct. 2006; and United Nations Al Qaeda and Taliban Sanctions Committee, 'The list of individuals belonging to or associated with Al-Qaida organisation/Last updated on 25 July 2006', www.un.org/Docs/sc/committees/1267/pdflist.pdf, accessed July 2006, p. 28.

²⁸ Author's interview with Noman Benotman, London, 15 Sept. 2006.

²⁹ Their conflict was not only over ideology. It was also personal. The sociable, highly articulate and charismatic Abu Qutadah had overshadowed al-Suri, winning over to his camp many of al-Suri's followers. Al-Suri had simply failed to establish himself as a leader, and gather a large crowd of followers, even though he was respected for his knowledge

orientation than the hard-line, but pragmatic, militarily oriented jihadism of al-Suri. When he abandoned London in 1997, one of the first objectives he set for himself was to write his memoirs of his involvement in the GIA media cell in order to expose Abu Qutadah and reveal his 'catastrophic influence' on the Jihadi Current in Algeria, a project many of his fellow Afghan-Arabs strongly discouraged him from fulfilling.³⁰

Like al-Suri, Abu Qutadah had also been in Peshawar, but only since 1990, and he went inside Afghanistan only after Kabul had been re-conquered, in 1992.³¹ After they fell out with each other, al-Suri began reminding his readers that Abu Qutadah only came to the Afghanistan scene 'after the Afghan jihad had ended' and was not a proper jihadi with field experience.³² This point is also illustrative of al-Suri's criticism of the Salafis. The Salafis had not earned their credentials on the battlefield, and they were ill-equipped to guide the jihadi movement in the increasingly more inhospitable and complicated security environment confronting the jihadis from the mid-1990s onwards.

Al-Suri's description of Abu Qutadah's rise to prominence is revealing:

'His prayer hall became a place where bulletins were distributed, donations were collected, and a place where jihadis and zealots gathered. It also became a spot where the British security services and other secret services monitored the Islamists. With his simplicity and easy manners, Abu Qutadah became the religious reference point for these Algerian youth, Arab-Afghans and others in London who joined his school. After a period of time, he became the reference point for many others in European capitals. [...] This happened in spite of the fact that Abu Qutadah himself was not a jihadi and had no history in that field. However, his Salafi background, his oratory zeal, and his adoption of the jihadis' ideas together with his thirst in jihadi circles for any scholar or student of knowledge, his support for their programs and coverage of their needs, made him into a shaykh and a jihadi reference point for this circle'.³³

Al-Suri recalls how Abu Qutadah attracted a crowd in a way he found disconcerting due to his own constant security alertness:

'He had been a supporter of the Tabligh group, before he converted to the Salafi ideology. He inherited these oratory qualities, the open, unsnobbish and sociable manners. He loved extensive meetings. He opened his house and subsequently his mosque to every visitor, where every issue was discussed with each and everyone in a spontaneous and unsnobbish manner. Secret houses were opened, where dinner parties were held for the group. In spite of what this style [of activism] brought in terms of a warm atmosphere and many followers, its security complications were an inescapable issue, especially in the climate of London and among the supporters of jihad in Algeria'.³⁴

When the headquarters of the Al-Ansar Newsletter was raided by British police in 1995, al-Suri called upon Abu Qutadah and his followers to see this as a wake-up call. After all, they were

and expertise. Author's interview with Camille Tawil, London, 14 Sept. 2006; and author's interview with Saad al-Faqih via telephone, 17 Sept. 2006.

³⁰ Cited in Umar Abd al-Hakim (Abu Mus'ab al-Suri), *A Summary of My Testimony on Jihad in Algeria, 1988-1996* (in Arabic) (Place and publisher unknown, 1 June 2004, Issues for the Triumphant in Righteousness Series no.6), [hereafter, *Summary of My Testimony on Jihad in Algeria, 1988-1996*], p. 27.

³¹ 'Q&A with Muslim cleric Abu Qatada' *CNN.com* 29 Nov. 2001, <http://archives.cnn.com/2001/WORLD/europe/11/27/gen.qatada.transcript.cnn/>, accessed Oct. 2006.

³² *Summary of My Testimony on Jihad in Algeria, 1988-1996*, p. 29.

³³ *Ibid*, p. 21.

³⁴ *Ibid*, p. 28.

behind enemy lines and should start thinking of applying guerrilla warfare tactics to their media work:

‘I made them understand that we were in a hit and run war. I presented to them a plan for how to continue: work on the publication of a new journal, change the place of issuing it to one of the Scandinavian countries, and spread the activities to more than one place. I warned them that “the security storm” was coming, and that we were forced to deal with it in the manner of a guerrilla war of hit and run, even in the field of our media activities’.³⁵

However, these warnings fell on deaf ears. Instead al-Suri says he was ridiculed by Abu Qutadah’s supporters who called him ‘James Bond’. Underneath the disagreement over the practical organisation of the media cell, one may discern a more profound clash between al-Suri’s pragmatic military-oriented jihadism and Abu Qutadah’s strict purist Salafist orientation. Writes al-Suri:

‘Abu Qutadah was extreme in his support of Salafism and the Ahl al-Sunnah school and the ideas of the Wahhabite Call. He was strongly opposed to other schools within the broader circle of Ahl al-Sunnah. He vehemently fought sectarianism (*madhhabiyah*); he was aggressive in his discussions, stern in his expressions, issued bold fatwas and rulings, had excessive confidence in himself, and was not tolerant of other opinions. [...] He had a list of heresies, (lit. “innovativisms”, *al-mubtadi’ah*) in Islam. He dubbed it “the school of straying from the right path and heretic tendencies” (*ahl al-dalal ma’l-abwa*), and it included most of the Islamic doctrinal, legal and missionary, reformist and political schools, even a number of the jihadi schools, new as old, their programs and their men’.³⁶

Their ideological differences went so far that Abu Qutadah’s followers began accusing al-Suri of being an heretic. Al-Suri claims he attempted to dissuade Abu Qutadah from adopting hard-line positions on doctrinal issues since they were useless or even negative for the struggle. Abu Qutadah and his followers did not listen:

‘In their eyes, we were only activists (*barakiyyun*), who theorized in politics. We were not clean of the Muslim Brotherhood virus, despite the fact that we were among the jihadis. We did not understand the issues of Islamic doctrine!! [...] It did not last long before his followers, especially Abu Walid al-Filastini [one of Abu Qutadah’s closest aides], began issuing fatwas saying that I was an heretic (lit. “innovator”, *min al-mubtadi’ah*)’.³⁷

Al-Suri came to blame Abu Qutadah for the growing popularity of hard-line Salafi doctrines among the GIA supporters in London and beyond. There is little doubt that these types of hard-line Salafi rhetoric were present in GIA publications in Europe in the subsequent period, and had become the language by which the GIA’s bloody purges of opponents from 1995 onwards were justified.³⁸ In al-Suri’s view, this had a tremendously destructive effect on the jihadi movement:

‘[Shaykh Abu Qutadah al-Filastini’s influences] also had consequences for the ‘Salafi-jihadi excessiveness’ school (*minhaj ‘ghulat al-salafiyah al-jihadiyyah*), which gradually became more prominent in the shadow of this cause. Abu Qutadah should be considered - in my view - among the most prominent theoreticians of this school. Together with a few others, Abu Qutadah threw himself into its chairmanship role in the period that followed. He seduced

³⁵ *Ibid*, p. 32.

³⁶ *Ibid*, p. 28.

³⁷ *Ibid*, p. 31.

³⁸ For an illustrative example see ‘The Ruling of Fighting the Innovators’ (in Arabic), *majallat al-jama’ah*, No. 10 (Sept. 1996).

them to his side and they issued fatwas on whatever the extremist listeners in Algeria and followers in London and elsewhere in Europe requested from them.³⁹

Not being a recognized religious cleric himself, al-Suri had no way to confront Abu Qutadah on religious grounds. He witnessed with growing bitterness how his former Algerian disciples and trainees from the Peshawar period now joined Abu Qutadah's circle: 'they were Salafis who were inclined to extremism like him [Abu Qutadah]. The youth adhere faithfully to their shaykhs, and attach a holiness and infallibility to them'.⁴⁰

For a period of time, there was a mutual boycott between Abu Qutadah and al-Suri. During the crisis following the GIA's execution of two leading mujahidun leaders from the Algerianist (or *al-Jaz'arah*) current, violent quarrels occurred between them.⁴¹ The Al-Ansar Newsletter was completely taken over by Abu Qutadah followers, and al-Suri says he had to purchase the bulletin at the entrance of Abu Qutadah's prayer hall where he was treated like 'a stranger'.⁴² He was especially incensed by the fact that his name remained so closely associated with Abu Qutadah's writings in the Al-Ansar Newsletter, where the latter bestowed legitimacy on the bloody purges in Algeria after the jihad had 'deviated' under Jamal Zaytuni's emirate. Al-Suri portrayed Abu Qutadah as someone who whitewashed the GIA, but not as the GIA's primary religious reference point:

'The GIA leadership in Algeria was a group of deviants already and the Algerian intelligence completed their deviance and employed them, but Abu Qutadah's role was that of a mufti who bestowed legitimacy on the deviancy after it had occurred for the audiences in exile. He had no role internally in Algeria as far as I know. [...] Abu Qutadah and Abu Walid played for Abd al-Rahman Amin [Zaytuni], and his group of criminals and supporters in exile, the same role as Ibn Baz and Ibn Uthaymin play for the ruling Saudi family. This was their crime'.⁴³

On arriving in Afghanistan in 1997, al-Suri isolated himself in a desert guesthouse near Qandahar where he wrote a 130-page manuscript in order to tell the true story about Abu Qutadah, but facing strong opposition from other leading jihadis, he decided to postpone its publication. It was not until 2004 that his book on Algeria and Abu Qutadah appeared on the jihadi web, and it remains the most biographical of all his written publications.

Few jihadi writers have used stronger words about a cherished jihadi ideologue such as Abu Qutadah. Although egotism, personality clashes and rivalries clearly played an important part in al-Suri's conflict with Abu Qutadah, this conflict highlights not only the presence of a significant ideological divide right at the core of the Jihadi Current, but also the depth of this ideological chasm. Al-Suri's critique also provides insight into what kind of policy dilemmas and negative operative implications a rigid application of doctrinaire Salafism may create for the Jihadi Current, since it implies that religious learning and observance of strict religious doctrines are prioritized to the detriment of skills such as organisational experience, military training and strategic expertise.

The Controversy over the Taleban's (Lack of) Islamic Legitimacy

The policy dilemmas resulting from the rise of a doctrinaire Salafi sub-current within the Jihadi movement were also very visible in Afghanistan, the main playing field for the jihadis since the

³⁹ *Summary of My Testimony on Jihad in Algeria, 1988-1996*, p. 29.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

⁴² 'Meeting with the Kuwaiti Newspaper', audiofile no. 4, p. 3; and *Ibid.*, p. 35.

⁴³ *Summary of My Testimony on Jihad in Algeria, 1988-1996*, p. 37.

late 1980s.⁴⁴ There were significant differences in religious observance and practices between the Arab volunteer fighters, many of whom were observant Salafis, and the Afghan resistance, who by and large observed the Hanafi school and were tolerant of Sufi shrines and other practices that Salafis regarded as godless ‘innovatism’ in Islam. This had been a problem during the first Arab-Afghan experience from the mid-1980s to c.1992, and no less so during the ‘second round’ following the Taleban’s seizure of power in 1996 until its downfall in late 2001.

A significant segment of the Arab-Afghan community in Afghanistan did not trust the Taleban, just as they mistrusted and despised the Afghan population for its superstitious and deviant religious observance, which came on top of their contempt for Afghanistan’s general backwardness, and primitiveness. Partly due to the prevalence of hard-line Salafi attitudes among them, the Arab-Afghans soon became embroiled in tense ideological disputes over whether the Taleban regime should be considered an Islamic Emirate which it was worth fighting for and to which emigration was obligatory. Many Arab militants who had moved to Afghanistan considered the Islamic Emirate as just another temporary safe haven, from which they might train their members and reorganise their forces in preparation for an armed campaign in their home countries. For them, the Taleban regime was not a kernel or a starting point for the coming Islamic Caliphate. Hence, fighting alongside the Taleban against the Northern Alliance was not a religious duty. Among the hard-line Salafis in the Arab-Afghan community, the criticism of the Taleban went much further: they argued that it was utterly impermissible to fight alongside the Taleban regime because it meant fighting under an infidel banner.⁴⁵

In his books, al-Suri describes at great lengths the destructive role played by the Salafi hardliners in Afghanistan who seized any opportunity to reprimand and correct ‘deviant behaviour’ among those Arab fighters who adapted to local customs, for example by praying in the manner the Afghans prayed. The Salafis’ contempt for the Taleban and other non-Salafi mujahidin fighters knew no boundaries:

‘One of the astonishing things I must mention in this context is a statement made by one of those extremist Salafi Jihadis. He told me in one of our conversations that *“jihad must be under the Salafi banner; its leadership, program, and religious rulings must also be Salafi; and everything should be subjected to proof [in accordance with Salafi methodology]. If we should accept that non-Salafis participate with us in Jihad, we do only do so because we need them. However, they should not have any leadership role at all. We should lead them like a herd of cows to perform their duty of jihad.”* I couldn’t really understand how we are going to participate in Jihad with our brethren in religion and faith if we should deal with them as a herd of cows [...].’⁴⁶

Obviously, such contemptuous attitudes opened up serious divisions in the Arab-Afghan diaspora regarding the future course of action, especially with regards to their position on the Taleban.

In Afghanistan, al-Suri became known as one of the Taleban’s most faithful defenders against the Salafis. Al-Suri had always displayed pragmatism and leniency vis-à-vis non-adherence to the strict Salafi code of conduct as long as the zeal and determination to fight a jihad was beyond doubt. This, he found among the Taleban.⁴⁷ Working directly with the Taleban authorities, al-

⁴⁴ This section draws heavily on my book Brynjar Lia, *Architect of Global Jihad*, pp. 239-245.

⁴⁵ See the discussion in ‘Are the Taliban from Ahl as-Sunnah?’, At-Tibyaan Publications website, <http://tibyaan.atspace.com/tibyaan/articlef7c9.html?pid=1116>, accessed Feb. 2007. The article contains extensive quotes from al-Suri’s book *Afghanistan, the Taliban, and the Battle of Islam Today* (in Arabic, 1998).

⁴⁶ *The Global Islamic Resistance Call*, pp. 844-5.

⁴⁷ Due to his conflict with bin Ladin, he could obviously not afford also to be on bad terms with the Afghan government, but there was clearly a strong ideological component behind his decision. Abdel Bari Atwan, the Arab news editor who met with al-Suri several times during the mid- and late 1990s, recalls that al-Suri telephoned him in

Suri became spokesman for a current of thinking that advocated paying allegiance to Mullah Umar, the Taliban's supreme leader.⁴⁸ Al-Suri vigorously defended the Emirate in his publications and during his lectures and while travelling inside Afghanistan. His first published work in Afghanistan after his return to the country was a long epistle primarily dedicated to refute hard-line Salafi charges against the Taliban regime that the conditions for the *Abode of Islam* (Dar al-Islam), to which true Muslim believers should emigrate, were not yet present in Afghanistan. (Thus, the Taliban government was not a legitimate government, and their war against the Northern Alliance was not a jihad [‘in this war both the killer and the killed will go to hell’]).⁴⁹

Judging by letters and documents uncovered in Afghanistan after the US-led invasion, al-Suri was clearly seen as an important Taliban advocate. His book on the Taliban remains one of his most cited books, and was referred to by trainees in al-Qaida's training camps.⁵⁰ In one letter discussing the ‘Taliban's infidelity’, he was accused of having written a long research paper stating that ‘it is permissible to fight under the banner of infidelity, supporting his opinion with quotes from here and there’.⁵¹ In other correspondence, his name arose when the Taliban's request for UN membership was condemned. (The hard-line Salafis viewed the UN as an Infidel organisation.)⁵²

The Salafi problem was not simply a disturbing factor in the Arab-Afghan community's relationship with the Taliban. It also threatened al-Qaida's legitimacy as bin Ladin moved to

1997 or 1998, saying that he had stopped working for al-Qaida, and that instead he now served as media adviser for the Taliban. Author's interview with Abdel Bari Atwan, London, 28 April 2006.

⁴⁸ However, his relationship with the Taliban expanded gradually. At the time of interview by the Kuwaiti newspaper *al-Ra'y al-'Amm* in April 1999, he had not yet met with Mullah Umar. It was only in early 2000 that he met with Mullah Umar and swore an oath of allegiance to him. From then on, he ‘maintained extensive relations with Mullah Umar’, according to Spanish court documents. According to one source, al-Suri used to spend many hours sitting with the Taliban leader at the latter's office in Qandahar. See ‘Abu Mus'ab al-Suri's Communiqué to the British and Europeans regarding the London Bombings in July 2006’, *Middle East Transparent* website, 23 December 2005, www.mettransparent.com/texts/abu_massab_assuri_communique_calling_for_terror_in_europe.htm, accessed October 2006; ‘Meeting with the Kuwaiti Newspaper (al-Ra'i al-'Amm) in Kabul, 18 March 1999’ (in Arabic), transcript of audiofile No.2, p. 5; ‘Communiqué from the Office of Abu Mus'ab al-Suri’ (in Arabic), 22 December 2004, p. 7; ‘Juzgado Central de Instrucción N° 005, Madrid, Sumario’, 17 September 2003, p. 28; and José María Irujo, ‘El hombre de Bin Laden en Madrid’, *El País* 2 March 2005, www.elpais.es/comunes/2005/11m/08_comision/libro_electronico_red_islam/red_islamista_01%20doc.pdf, accessed July 2006, p. 18.

⁴⁹ Umar Abd al-Hakim (Abu Mus'ab al-Suri), *Afghanistan, the Taliban and the Battle of Islam Today* (in Arabic), (Kabul: The al-Ghuraba Center for Islamic Studies, 11 October 1998, Issues for the Triumphant in Righteousness Series no.1), pp. 2-3. This criticism has also been referred to on later occasions in jihadi web forum discussions about the Taliban. See ‘An Interpretation of Imam Mullah Umar, May God Protect him’ (in Arabic), *muntada al-safinet* 10 November 2005, www.al-saf.net/vb/showthread.php?t=18448&highlight=%E3%D5%DA%C8+%C7%E1%D3%E6%D1%ED, accessed November 2005.

⁵⁰ See Document No. AFGP-2002-801138, ‘Various Admin Documents and Questions’, p. 45, www.ctc.usma.edu/aq/AFGP-2002-801138-Trans.pdf, and www.ctc.usma.edu/aq/AFGP-2002-801138-Orig.pdf, accessed April 2006, p. 50 (translation).

⁵¹ Document No. AFGP-2002-601693, ‘Status of Jihad’. *Combating Terrorism Center website* (West Point), www.ctc.usma.edu/aq/AFGP-2002-601693-Trans.pdf and www.ctc.usma.edu/aq/AFGP-2002-601693-Orig.pdf, accessed April 2006.

⁵² The letter stated: ‘We saw, through the story of the Syrian brother Abi-Mos'ab and others, how they were making insignificant excuses in order to continue requesting a seat at the United Nations. Once they declare, “We only need the seat to prompt the countries of the world to acknowledge us,” they consider that as a license to have rights. Meanwhile, they say “This is a rotten organization; let's send a bad man.” Where can we find people who are able to challenge the world [to recognize that] destroying the idols that were left behind is not as great a sin as joining the United Nations?’ Cited in Document No. AFGP-2002-602181, ‘Political Speculation’, *Combating Terrorism Center website* (West Point), www.ctc.usma.edu/aq/AFGP-2002-602181-Trans.pdf and www.ctc.usma.edu/aq/AFGP-2002-602181-Original.pdf, accessed April 2006.

solidify his alliance with Mullah Umar. According to memoirs by an Arab-Afghan veteran who attended Khalden training camp from 1996 onwards, the ideological conflict over the Taleban's Islamic legitimacy had been particularly strong at that camp, especially at the *Institute for the Faith Brigades* (ma'had kata'ib al-iman), located next to the camp.⁵³ The students at the Institute, who were mostly North African jihadis, began publicising bin Ladin's 'misguided errors', especially the fact that he fought with the Taleban, many of whom were 'immersed in the greatest of sins'.⁵⁴ Their criticism of bin Ladin also included his relationship with Sudan and leading politicians in Pakistan. They also accused a leading figure in al-Qaida's juridical committee, Abu Hafis al-Mawritani of being a follower of *mu'tazilah*, an unorthodox school in early Sunni Islam, most known for denying that the Quran was eternal and insisting upon free will.

This hard-line Salafi agitation against the Taleban and al-Qaida led to heavy pressure being placed on the Khalden camp administration to discipline the radicals. While some of the radicals chose to leave the camp, others began changing their views about the Taleban. This shift came partly as a result of al-Suri's efforts in propagating the case for the Taleban. Together with other leading jihadis, such as the Abu Layth al-Libi, a leading member of the *Libyan Islamic Fighting Group* (LIFG), he was instrumental in persuading them to accept al-Qaida's policy of fighting for the Taleban.⁵⁵

Judging by his writings after his arrival in Taleban-ruled Afghanistan, al-Suri appears to have grown increasingly disappointed by the inability of the jihadi organizations to rally the Islamic Nation, the *ummah*, in defense of the Taleban. When he looked back at the Afghan experience of 2004, he lamented the fact that so few had decided to settle in and defend the Islamic Emirate. His disenchantment with the scholars is evident: 'none of the Muslim scholars, particularly renowned clerics, and none of the symbols of Islamic call (*da'wah*) who deafened the world with empty slogans about jihad, emigrated there.'⁵⁶ Al-Suri and those Arab-Afghans who wished to make the Taleban a pillar of their jihadi project had clearly failed, not only because they fought an uphill battle against the Taleban's external enemies, but perhaps even more so because of the sizeable anti-Taleban opposition *within* the Jihadi Currents themselves, quite apart from the general condescending Arab attitude towards the Islamic Emirate.

Concluding Remarks

Al-Suri's critique of the Salafis in the Jihadi Current has highlighted some interesting ideological cleavages inside al-Qaida and contemporary jihadism, which often tend to be overlooked since most jihadi writers avoid the topic or couch it in such obfuscated language that it becomes unintelligible for outsiders.

There is little doubt that doctrinaire Salafi influences have profoundly altered the ideological character of the Jihadi Current, since the early 1990s, following decades of Qutbi dominance in militant Islamic rhetoric. The rise of Salafi discourses and doctrines has, in many ways, reduced the *political* content in contemporary jihadi ideology, and weakened its ability to provide formulas for alliances with other political forces. Indeed, perhaps the most important elements in al-Suri's critique of the Salafis are his descriptions of its exclusiveness and eagerness to engage in side-battles with 'deviancy' and 'un-Islamic sects'. By virtue of the very presence of these ideological

⁵³ See 'The Truth of Abu Abdallah Muhajir who led al-Zarqawi astray and enabled the latter to shed blood' (in Arabic), *muntadayat al-mahdi*, 14 July 2005, www.almahdy.name/vb/showthread.php?t=3354, accessed August 2006. I am indebted to my colleague Truls Hallberg Tønnessen for this information and for locating these memoirs on the web.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ *The Global Islamic Resistance Call*, p. 40. This excerpt can also be found in 'Thirteenth Part of Serialized Book on Al-Zarqawi and Al-Qa'ida Published Part 13 of serialized book: "Al-Zarqawi... The Second Generation of Al-Qa'ida"' by Fu'ad Husayn, Jordanian writer and journalist, *Al-Quds Al-'Arabi* (London) 11 July 2005, via FBIS.

elements at the heart of the Jihadi Current, this global insurgent movement is bound to have limited popular appeal and is destined to remain what al-Suri did not want it to be, namely 'elitist', 'marginal', and doomed to failure.

List of Selected Works by Abu Musab al-Suri

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⁵⁷ Posted on *muntada al-tajdid* 31 May 2006. Accessed June 2006 at www.tajdeed.org.uk/forums/showthread.php?s=6548b36708e3c3eff8db8327623a51e8&threadid=41941.

⁵⁸ This publication appears to be an excerpt from Umar Abd al-Hakim, *The Islamic Jihadi Revolution in Syria: Part I. The Experience and Lessons (Hopes and Pains)* (in Arabic) (Peshawar: publisher unknown, May 1991).

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